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Ford Ceramic Arts Columbus, Ohio

By James L. Murphy



For about five years during the late 1930s, the combination of inventive and artistic talent provided by Walter D. Ford (1906-1988) and Paul V. Bogatay (1905-1972), gave life to Ford Ceramic Arts, Inc., a small and little-known Columbus, Ohio, firm specializing in ceramic art and design.

The venture, at least in the beginning, was intimately associated with Ohio State University (OSU), from which Ford graduated in 1930 with a degree in Ceramic Engineering, and where Bogatay began his tenure as an instructor of design in 1934. In fact, the first plant, begun in 1936, was actually located on the OSU campus, at 319 West Tenth Avenue, now the site of Ohio State University's School of Nursing. There two periodic kilns produced "decorated pottery and dinnerware, molded porcelain cameos, and advertising specialties."

Ford was president and ceramic engineer; Norman M. Sullivan, secretary, treasurer, and purchasing agent; Bogatay, art director. Subsequently, the company moved to 4591 North High Street, and Ford's brother, Byron E., became vice-president.

Walter, or "Flivver" Ford, as he had been known since high school, was interested primarily in the engineering aspects of the venture, and it was several of his processes for producing photographic images in relief or intaglio on ceramics that distinguished the products of the company.

Earlier, Bogatay, as a Rockefeller Foundation Fellow under Arthur Baggs and Richard F. Bach, had attempted to invigorate American dinnerware design which, at the time, has been

rightly characterized by Henrietta Bogatay as “nothing but little pink roses.” The Great Depression, however, prevented production of Bogatay's designs for the most part. While working for Ford Ceramic Arts, Bogatay continued to free-lance for other Ohio potteries, including Robinson Ransbottom, Steubenville, and Harker. He also tried to interest dinner-ware potteries in Ford's photographic process, but it seems to have been too complicated for large-scale commercial development. The Steubenville Pottery Company does appear to have manufactured at least one plate using Ford's process to reproduce a view of the New York skyline, very likely commemorating the 1939 World's Fair.

The earliest known example of a Ford Ceramic Arts product is a scarce portrait plate commemorating the coronation of King Edward VII of England, which can be dated to 1937. Much more common is a navy blue portrait plate commemorating the centenary of the birth of Frances E. Willard, thus dating to 1939. Other dinnerware designs include cleanly-drawn stylized magnolias and a peasant scene with a woman carrying a basket on her head.

In addition to its dinnerware, much of which was custom designed, Ford Ceramic Arts produced several artistic vases, bearing nudes, a depiction of Diana the Huntress, and various stylized floral designs. Glazes were generally monochrome white, light blue, cobalt blue, blue-green, yellow, gray, and brown. A contrasting color was occasionally used to highlight the intaglio design in their Pegasus vase and a small creamer said to depict Ford's nephew, Byron Ford, Jr., as a young boy.

Ford Ceramic Arts did not hesitate to enter the souvenir trade, as shown by several small deco-shaped vases made for Ohio historic sites such as Campus Martius and Schoenbrunn (early settlements now marked by state memorials) and a large lamp base of similar form bearing a representation of Mount Vernon. Closer to home, the company even tried hawking the likeness of OSU's most famous football player, Chic Harley, on an ashtray. One of their more popular items appears to have been a tea tile depicting a full-rigged sailing ship. (As a young man, Bogatay worked on Great Lakes ore boats and later made his way around the world as an able-bodied seaman on the S.S. Bessemer City.) A similar design, with the addition of a couple of doves, also appears on a Ford pitcher.



Other items manufactured by Ford Ceramic Arts include a variety of buttons, which can be identified only by the use of Ford's copyright photographic process, as none were marked. The company also manufactured a child's cereal bowl for the Ralston Purina Company.

Especially rare are examples of Ford's relief porcelain plaques. The process was patented in 1939, the example used being a medallion bearing the likeness of General Edward Orton, the founder of the American Ceramic Society. Other examples known are a likeness of the Bogatays' first son, Paul, Jr.; Dr. Ross Purdy, American Ceramic Society president for many years; and the head of Michelangelo's *David*. The process is a complicated one involving preparation of a gelatin film requiring two weeks drying time, developing a relief negative, transferring the relief to a "plaster" composed of dental wax, making a reverse cast from this first cast, and a third cast from it; from this third cast a wax relief is made which is transferred onto a curved plaster surface and a master mold made from it. It was the use of color glazes in this process which Ford found applicable to the pottery, glass and enamel industries.

In 1940, Walter Ford presented a synopsis of the applications of photography in ceramics to the American Ceramic Society's White Wares and Materials and Equipment Divisions, later published in the Society's *Bulletin*. The following year he accepted a position as Senior Ceramic Engineer with Pittsburgh Corning, where he remained until his retirement 30 years later. Ford Ceramic Tile ended production with his leaving Columbus, and the building site is now an asphalt-covered parking lot. Paul Bogatay continued teaching at Ohio State University until shortly before his death in 1966.

At least one Columbus amateur ceramist, Curtis G. Howard (1912-1994), appears to have mastered Ford's process. After graduating from Ohio State University (M.S. Education, 1941), Howard taught in Columbus schools for many years and produced ceramics in his spare time. Several pieces signed while he was an OSU student are known, and it is possible that he mastered the Ford process while working part-time at the company. Or he may have experimented with Ford's published description of the process. In any case, several small portrait tiles signed by Howard have recently come to light, although they are made of yellow clay rather than the porcelain body used by Ford Ceramic Arts.

Although some pieces of Ford Ceramic art, particularly the dinnerware, were not marked as such, many of the more artistic pieces bear the company's impressed "ARS" logo — which was also used on the company letterhead — but these often go unrecognized today, even in the Columbus area. (It is said that in its day the logo caused no little amusement and some consternation among the less-Latin-literate citizens of Columbus.) Other pieces are clearly marked "Ford Ceramic Arts, Inc., Columbus, Ohio."

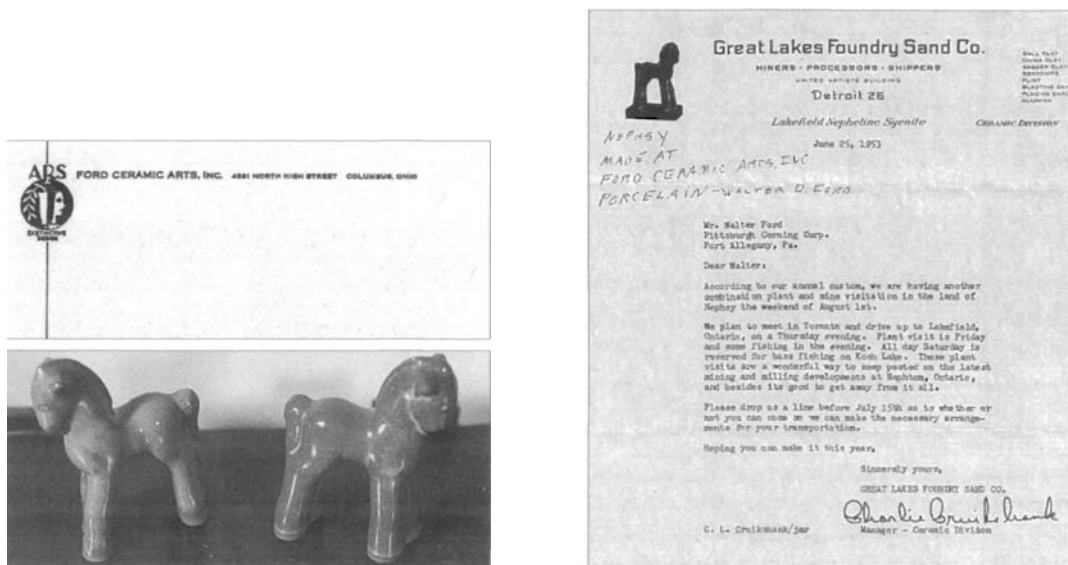
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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Much of the information in this article has been provided by Mrs. Gladys Ford and Mrs. Henrietta Bogatay. In May, 1997, it was a pleasure to visit with both Mrs. Ford and Mrs. Bogatay. As Mrs. Ford noted, the two had not seen one another since 1941, when the Fords left Columbus. Since that meeting, Mrs. Ford has generously donated to the Smithsonian Institution copies of her husband's patents, and several examples of Ford Ceramics' work. Additional

information comes from an unsigned biographical sketch of Paul Bogatay attributed to his son Todd Bogatay.

An unsigned article on Walter Ford, “Ohio Features Ceramics Genius,” appears in *Flash Point: The Quarterly Bulletin of the Tile Heritage Foundation*, Volume 4, Number 2, and much of this information has been repeated in Dick Sigafoose's *American Art Pottery* (Paducah, Kentucky: Collectors Books, 1997), which also includes an illustration of the Chic Harley ashtray. A Bogatay Pegasus vase is also illustrated in *Cowan Pottery and the Cleveland School* by Mark Bassett and Victoria Naumann (Atglen, Pennsylvania: Schiffer Publishing, 1997).



“Nephsy” Not Nicodemus

One of the advertising specialty pieces made by Ford Ceramic Arts was a porcelain horse designed by Bogatay for the Ceramic Division of the Great Lakes Foundry Sand Company, of Detroit, Michigan. This firm, no longer in business, specialized in providing raw materials such as ball clay, bentonite, flint, placing sand, and “Lakefield” nepheline syenite, the latter from a mine at Nephton, Ontario.

Thanks to Mrs. Gladys Ford, a copy of the letterhead of this company is available. It shows “Nephsy,” which had become something of an emblem or logo for the company. This particular letter invites Walter Ford to the company's 1953 annual plant and mine visitation “in the land of Nephsy.”

As can be seen from the accompanying photograph, “Nephsy” did not always stand on a platform, and was sometimes made of more common clay. Small horse figurines precisely matching Bogatay's design but made from red clay and decorated with common blue and red glazes are occasionally seen in the Columbus area, usually misidentified as one of the little animals of longtime Columbus artist Chester Nicodemus (1901-1990) or one of his students — probably because of the red clay, but certainly not because of the glazes, which do not match those Nicodemus commonly used.

Aside from the fact that these horses match Bogatay's “Nephsy” exactly, available Nicodemus price lists and catalogues neither list nor illustrate any horse figurines. (See JAPPA VIII [6],

inside back cover.) Although Nicodemus may have turned out some miniature horses not included in his brochures, he clearly did not produce these. Paul Bogatay was never a student of Nicodemus.

While Mrs. Ford does not recall seeing any examples of “Nephsy” that were not porcelain, Mrs. Bogatay identified these two on sight. The explanation very probably lies in the fact that following the demise of Ford Ceramic Arts, Inc., Paul Bogatay, while continuing to teach at Ohio State University, also worked with ceramist Edgar Littlefield at his “Littlefield Kilns” making art- and giftware from about 1946 to 1950. Very likely these small figurines were made during this period.